DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 684 RC 016 252

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TITLE Outdoor Leadership Evaluation: Nature and Scope of the Problem.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adventure Education; Educational Philosophy; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Experiential Learning; Human Relations; *Job Skills; Knowledge Level; *Leaders; Leadership Qualities; Leadership Responsibility; Minimum Competencies; *Outdoor Education; *Personnel Evaluation; Program Development; Program Improvement; Standards

ABSTRACT

Beyond the ability to exhibit good judgment and common sense while performing duties as a leader under stress and pressure, an outdoor adventure program leader should possess technical skills, human relations skills, and philosophical understanding of outdoor programming. Technical skills include knowledge of initiatives/ropes course activities, first aid and other emergency care, expedition planning and organizing, survival techniques, and search and rescue techniques. Human relation skills take in the areas of counseling ability, crisis intervention, interpersonal communication, teaching ability, and assessment of psychological needs. Philosophical understanding covers philosophy of experiential education, leadership responsibilities, safety/risk management, personal and professional philosophy, and personal and professional goals and objectives. These skills could serve as a framework for the evaluation of outdoor leaders and the development of leadership standards badly needed in the field of outdoor adventure education. The evaluation process should distinguish between skills that require objective and subjective judgments and should involve the leader's peers as well as program administrators. A standardized evaluation process for outdoor leaders based upon an industry-wide set of standards and administered by a nationally recognized program would go a long way in lending credibility to the outdoor adventure movement. (JHZ)

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Rec'd 6-11-87

Outdoor leaders have one of the most important jobs because they work with people and the environment--two infinitely valuable resources.

--Michael A. Gass[1]

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Outdoor Leadership Evaluation
Nature and Scope of the Problem

By

Leroy M. James
1986

With the recent growth of Outdoor Adventure Programs (OAPs) in this country (particularly over the course of the past decade) has come an every-increasing demand for skilled, qualified outdoor leaders to lead the diversity of activities that are offered by such programs. Unfortunately, the demand for such leaders has outpaced the supply and some observers of the field maintain that many of the leaders and instructors involved in OAPs today ". . .are hardly more experienced or capable than many of the students who are routinely entrusted to their care."[2] It is a reality that many of them lack the depth and breadth of skills in their respective fields of expertise that is gained through experience and qualifies them to be leaders in the out-of-doors.

The commonly-held perception of such leaders as needing to be "professionals" in their field stands in stark contrast to a glaring lack of consensus amongst program directors and administrators regarding what constitutes a set of minimum qualifications/qualities that determines a level of professionalism. A number of research efforts in this area have substantiated this set of circumstances. Buell comments on this in his 1981 study: "There is a demand for the field to identify essential and important leadership competencies which can

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serve as the basis for quality and safety standards of performance."[3] Also, in a similar study, Cosgrove, in concert with a panel of eight professionals in the field of Outdoor Adventure Programming, found that a search of the literature was unable to ascertain any level of consensus on a set of minimum skill competencies necessary to qualify outdoor leaders to lead.[4] What he and his colleagues were able to establish is a general agreement that ". . .competency of a leader is made up of a variety of components (training, experience, leadership ability, judgment, skill, personality, health, etc.)."[5] and that there is little disagreement over the fact that a program's success or failure in large part hinges on the quality of the staff leading its programs.

This aspect of an OAP is notable because of the unique nature of outdoor leadership responsibility: A responsibility for program participants that, at times, must be accepted and acted upon in an oftentimes hostile and always unpredictable environment--the out-of-doors. The magnitude of leadership responsibility is expressed in the fact that the outdoor leader must accept ". . .the overall responsibility for the learning, welfare, and safety of the participants that he accompanies in a wilderness adventure experience."[6]

Thus, the evaluation of outdoor leaders and the manner in which each is judged "qualified" to lead OAPs has become a necessary management component of such programs. Indeed, the ever-rising cost of liability insurance for these types of programs and its concomitant need to look critically at all aspects of the program (competent leadership being at its core), has given rise to an increased demand for effective evaluation procedures and accompanying criteria. In this paper, we will look at the various components of the leadership evaluation process in OAPs in the hopes of clarifying some of the issues surrounding this hotly debated topic.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Most OAPs are characterized by a unique philosophy, which basically states that most people's real limitations differ from those which are perceived and/or imposed upon the individual. Self-, socially-, or culturally-imposed limitations can and should be challenged, and what better place to do so than in the out-of-doors--an alien environment for many that challenges them to overcome real, tangible obstacles and then allows for success in this realm to be metaphorically transposed to the individual's life. This use of metaphor then helps one to establish a new standard of success over previously accepted limitations in school, family, job, relationships, etc. The goals and objectives of such programs typically focus on enhancing self-esteem and independence, but are also program or situation specific, depending upon the client group, environment, type of activity, etc.

Effective staffing of these programs must reflect the philosophy, goals and objectives as stated by the program director(s). Indeed, the initial phase of staffing should include a ". . .careful review of the program goals [which] are central to the screening of applicants for adventure positions."[7] If established as one of the components of the staffing process, this review will help to provide the basis for effective program and staff evaluation at a later date.

OAPs employ a variety of program approaches which are designed to assist the leader in achieving the stated goals and objectives in working with the participants, to include "fixed-base" and "extended-trek" program elements. Fixed-base programming allows for the use of on-site facilities, as well as day outings to local areas to help build group cohesiveness, while at the same time developing individual self-confidence in one's abilities to overcome perceived

limitations. The extended-trek experience allows for a shared sense of responsibility while functioning as part of a self-sufficient entity in the out-of-doors. It is on these excursions where the real growth typically occurs.

Client groups in such programs cover the entire spectrum of societal groupings and sub-groupings; classrooms (elementary and secondary), businessmen, counselors, juvenile delinquents, psychiatric patients, incest victims, college professors, "therapy" groups, etc. Seldom is the experience programmed for an individual and the focus is primarily on group interaction as the catalyst for change. The opportunity for change to occur within the individual is enhanced by the supportive environment created within and amongst the group members. In this regard, since outdoor leaders work with so many special and so-called "at-risk" populations, it is incumbent upon the evaluation process to address skills relating to an understanding of the needs of such individuals. Also, staff to participant ratio is a critical factor in programming for the various activities with these populations and a ratio of 1:3 is an accepted standard.

PREREQUISITES TO EVALUATION

As already stated, a program's stated philosophy with an accompanying set of program goals and objectives is central to the formulation of evaluation procedures focusing on the outdoor leader. The findings of any evaluation process must reflect these. Secondly, clearly outlined job descriptions must be established and used as a basis for performance evaluation(s) of OAP leaders. Personal reference forms submitted to former employers/colleagues must be accompanied by a packet of information containing a description of the program and outlining its philosophy, goals and objectives. These references should be kept on file for subsequent leader evaluation. Such documents, asking the former employer/colleague to assess the leader's ". . .adventure skill level,

teaching ability, judgment, group dynamic skills and certification level"[8] will also assist in establishing acceptable/expected performance levels of the leader. Lastly, documented credentials of a leader should be on file and added to when appropriate. Such certifications would include evidence of formal training/ education, first aid/CPR/EMT/WSI certification and prior relevant experiences. Documentation of this nature will also aid in the subsequent review of a leader's level of skill in a specified area of competency.

EVALUATION OF LEADERS

A rationale for the evaluation of outdoor leaders emanates from a need to take a critical look at the development of OAPs and the concomitant growth of a "leadership corps" along the lines of an emerging profession. It is incumbent upon the field to take a long and hard look at where it has been and where it is going. In a survey of program administrators at the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Association for Experiential Education, Priest found that the three most common responses to the statement, "I see a need for effective outdoor leadership to. . ." were,

1) prevent (or reduce) wilderness accidents.
2) protect the outdoor environment from the destructive impact of travellers.
3) assure that participants realized their own abilities, experienced growth as individuals and as a member of the group, and enjoyed a positive adventure experience.[9]

Such lofty goals cannot be realized without some standard(s) of performance that is expected of the outdoor leader when involved in outdoor adventure programming for groups of participants. Such standards can be expressed through minimum levels of competency as delineated by researchers such as Buell, Cosgrove,

Priest and Swiderski. However, little consensus exists among them with regard to how such competencies should be categorized or what priorities should be established when considering what constitutes a leader's qualification to lead. Indeed, Cosgrove states that, "The development of leadership skill competencies can be a long, confusing and arduous task for students seeking a profession in wilderness adventure programs."[10]

One over-riding competency that is accepted by all leaders in the field is what Priest refers to as the "cementing component" of experienced-based judgment, which is the ability of the outdoor leader to make sound decisions based on his knowledge, skills, past experience and past poor judgment.[11] Swiderski's research supports this as demonstrated by his conclusion that the top competency identified by outdoor leaders in the West was the leader's skill at exercising ". . .good judgment and common sense while performing duties as a leader under stress and pressure."[12] Also, McAvoy maintains that, "The primary characteristic that all staff must possess is that of sound judgment and decision-making."[13] It is apparent that the outdoor leader's ability to function effectively is predicated upon his/her competency as reflected through the application of good judgment in the field.

Beyond the ability to exhibit the use of sound judgment, the evaluation of an outdoor leader should focus on three fairly broad categories of competencies, which are outlined below with accompanying pertinent comments. The specific skills have been limited to a list of five, deemed to be most important by myself for the purpose of this paper.

Technical skills: Those skills requiring an ability to perform an activity with precision and demonstrated knowledge.

1. Initiatives/ropes course activities.
2. Emergency care (first aid/EMT).
3. Expedition planning and organizing.
4. Survival techniques.
5. Search and rescue techniques.

Human relation skills: Those skills requiring a knowledge of human behavior and an accompanying ability to interact with others on a variety of levels.

1. Counseling ability.
2. Crisis intervention.
3. Communication.
4. Instructional/teaching ability.
5. Needs assessment (psychological "first aid").

With respect to these types of skills, Cosgrove concluded from his research efforts that the data he collected supported the conclusion that the human relation skills are an integral part of the "whole instructor."[14] When considering the diversity of the client populations that OAPs work with, it would be hard to argue with the fact that the outdoor leader has to be adept at the variety of skills needed to lead and teach such groups effectively.

Philosophical understanding: Skills at applying the underlying concepts and theories of outdoor programming.

1. Philosophy of experiential education.
2. Leadership responsibilities.
3. Safety/risk management.
4. Personal and professional philosophy.
5. Personal and professional goals and objectives.

Generally recognized as complementary to the categories of skills listed above and integral to the process of outdoor leadership development, personal and professional leadership qualities also must be mentioned in the process of evaluation. Although manifested in a realm of performance when applying knowledge and skills in the field of outdoor leadership, they still warrant examination as specific aspects of leadership ability. Again, the lists of qualities is limited to the five deemed most appropriate.

Personal	Professional
1. Self-confidence	1. Originality
2. Self discipline	2. Resourcefulness
3. Patience	3. Adaptability/flexibility
4. Enthusiasm	4. Develop appropriate objectives
5. Respect for others	5. Analytical prowess

One note regarding the quality of self-confidence that is pointedly stated by Lyman in assessing the abilities of outdoor leaders is that, ". . .by far, the greatest expression of the instructor's credibility in the eyes of his students will derive from the demonstrated ability and the resulting self-confidence of the leaders and instructors that can only have come from extensive personal experience and practice."[15] A genuine display of self-confidence, not bravado, is at the crux of the leader's ability to lead.

METHODOLOGY

In the evaluation process of outdoor leaders, it is necessary to distinguish between the evaluation of objective ("hard") skills and the subjective or "soft" skills. The hard skills of a technical nature can be evaluated by observing a level of demonstrated competency in real or simulated situations. Furthermore, the leader's personnel file, as discussed earlier, can be reviewed to ascertain the level of discrepancy, if any, between the demonstrated skills and expressed skills. The soft skills are not so easily evaluated and usually require a period of observation by the evaluator in conjunction with "consultation" sessions with peers and supervisors aimed at determining the leader's ability to learn how to apply such skills through acquired experience(s). The hard and soft skills need to be weighed against the goals and objectives of the program and how they should be applied during periods of activity involvement with clients in the various situations faced by the programs' leaders.

The evaluation process should include the outdoor leader's peers, as well as program directors/managers. Co-leaders are in the best position to ascertain certain levels of competency and such an assessment program ". . .could consist of a set of guidelines to evaluate the qualifications of the leaders and the program of the agency. The guidelines could be generated and evaluated by the outdoor leaders (peers) whom are leading similar trips and expeditions in the same regional area."[16] However, there is a caveat to be reckoned with, as Green raises the question of how the leaders can be evaluated on such subjective leadership qualities as judgment, ability to work with groups, etc. since "Outdoor leadership is a subjective experience which cannot be taught or objectively measured."[17]

Thus, we must consider the limitations in the evaluation process of the outdoor leader. One of those must be the difficulty in the measurement of the "soft skills" required of the outdoor leader. Indeed, the fickle nature of the out-of-doors combined with the unpredictability of the dynamics of client groups requires that the outdoor leader apply these skills in a myriad of ways in his/her efforts to effectively lead an outing/activity. Such diversity of circumstances mitigates against an effective means of measuring the leader's ability to consistently apply skills of this sort.

Another limitation on the evaluation process involving certain levels of competency in "stressful" situations is, paradoxically enough, the success of a well-conceived and well-executed risk management plan established for the activity being undertaken. A successfully applied risk management component of an OAP will prevent the occurrence of most situations that would require the outdoor leader to exhibit the level of skill and judgment that all OAPs expect from their leaders. It is unfortunate that a leader should have to be negligent in one skill are in order to display his/her abilities in another.

CERTIFICATION OF LEADERS:

Evaluation's Role

It is an unavoidable outcome of the proliferation of OAPs and the accompanying demand for qualified leaders to staff these programs that there exists increasing pressures within the industry to initiate a national certification program for outdoor leaders. The absence of a national network of certification agencies is cause for concern, given the nature of the outdoor leader position and the use of "therapeutic intervention" techniques widely accepted and used by leaders in the field of adventure programming.

A debate amongst practitioners in the field and other professionals outside of it centers on the argument over the validity of uniform licensing practices for use in certifying outdoor leaders--practices similar to those applied in the certification of a number of other professions. Senosk concludes that, "Certification or licensing for all outdoor pursuit leaders on a uniform and consistent level is considered less favorable than such a system on an individual basis."[18] This would seem to lend credence to an evaluation process for outdoor leaders that is program specific and established to meet the needs of the program's stated goals and objectives. However, such a move could conceivably severely limit the growth of the profession since it would put restrictions on the ability of outdoor leaders to make the transfer from one program to another because of differences in program format and, hence, differences in the level of "certification" required for that specific program.

A standardized evaluation process for outdoor leaders based upon an industry-wide set of standards and administered by a nationally recognized program would go a long way in lending credibility to the outdoor adventure movement and possibly reverse the trend of programs operating independently in an era that demands greater cooperation and interdependence.

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